



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

---

Volume 10  
Number 4

Article 7

---

1984

## The Evocation of Good in Tolkien

Peter Lowentrout

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Lowentrout, Peter (1984) "The Evocation of Good in Tolkien," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 10 : No. 4 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol10/iss4/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:  
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

SWOSU<sup>TM</sup>

---

## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021



### Abstract

Counters criticism of fantasy as morally negligible or as leading to morbid escapism; instead applies Tolkien's theory of eucatastrophe and defends the "clarity and vigor" of his vision of good in his fantasy.

### Additional Keywords

Fantasy—Characteristics; Good and evil in fantasy; Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-stories"

# The Evocation of Good in Tolkien

Peter Lowentrout

Imaginary evil is romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, barren, boring. Imaginary good is boring; real good is always new, marvelous, intoxicating. 'Imaginary literature,' therefore, is either boring, immoral or a mixture of both.<sup>1</sup>

So wrote Simone Weil. But J.R.R. Tolkien's evocation of a poignantly real good in his epic fantasy *The Lord of the Rings*, a good at once new, marvelous and intoxicating, shows that Weil's dictum is not always true, and a look at how Tolkien evokes the good in his fantasy, and at how the good is evoked in the best fantasy, will show that her prejudice about "imaginative literature" is often quite wrong.

In part, Tolkien's good is a "real good" rather than an "imaginary good" because, in the deepest sense, Middle Earth is itself real. Fantasy is not merely fanciful, and the successful fantacist is, in Tolkien's phrase, a "sub-creator" whose work has an inner-consistency.

(The story-maker) makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment of disbelief arises, the spell is broken, the magic, or rather art has failed.<sup>2</sup>

Nonsensical and surreal fantasy can never be considered high fantasy, Tolkien believes; Alice and her Wonderland he finds merely "amusing." (Ibid., p.14).

But the successful evocation of the good in high fantasy is not only the result of an inner-consistency. Middle Earth and all effective fantastic sub-creation is true not only to itself, but to us as well. In poetic response to a critic who had described the creation of myth and fairy-story as "breathing a lie through silver," Tolkien wrote:

Dear Sir, Although now long estranged, Man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed, Disgraced he may be, yet is not de-throned, and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned: Man, Sub-creator, the refracted Light through whom is splintered from a single White to many hues, and endlessly combined in living shapes that move from mind to mind. Though all the crannies of the world we filled with Elves and Goblins, though we dared to build Gods and their houses out of dark and light, and sowed the seed of dragons -- 'twas our right (used or misused). That right has not decayed: we make still by the law in which we're made. (Ibid., p. 54.)

"We make still by the law in which we're made": the surface of a secondary world may not be factual, but the deeper processes which inform that world are those, too, which inform ours. The myth and symbol with which fantasy works is not untrue, but a reflection in consciousness of deeper, subliminal movements in our psyches.

High fantasy is so satisfying and so well-able to evoke the good because it mirrors our world and, in doing so, accentuates and clarifies its deepest psychological, spiritual and even physical processes. It has sometimes been noted, for instance, that religious worship has no place in Middle Earth, and one critic has even concluded that Middle Earth is "pre-religious."<sup>3</sup> But Middle Earth and all the secondary worlds of high fantasy exist beyond the need for religion. Religion points to and claims to mediate for us the deep forces which shape our world; no such mediation is necessary in the clarified secondary world of fantasy where such forces, accentuated in the creative process, turn just beneath the surface. In Middle Earth, mind counts for something and arcs out into deep contact with nature and other minds. Prophecy and fate do actually yield the eschaton, while the worth and necessity of human moral effort are affirmed. In Middle Earth all of us can live in clear sight of the forces that make the world, a condition that has ever been the goal of religion.

High fantasy is sweet, indeed, in times like ours which have lost their hold on vital myth and its consolations. A numinosity suffuses the secondary creations of the best fantasy that has now been lost to many of us who inhabit the primary world, and even those of us who count ourselves as religious are seldom aware of the extent of our loss. Tolkien observes that:

Fantasy is made out of the Primary World, but a good craftsman loves his material, and has a knowledge and feeling for clay, stone and wood which only the art of making can give. By the forging of Gram cold iron was revealed; by the making of Pegasus horses were enobled; in the Trees of Sun and Moon root and stock, flower and fruit are manifested in glory.

And actually fairy-stories deal largely, or (the better ones) mainly, with simple or fundamental things, untouched by Fantasy, but these simple things are made all the more luminous by their setting. For the story-maker who allows himself to be "free with" Nature can be her lover not her slave. It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of the things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine. (The Tolkien Reader p. 59)

Once, we did not need fantasy to remind us of the numinosity of the physical. Even here, though, our world may in fact not be as distant from the secondary world as might at first seem. Everything is faerie is alive, while we are surrounded by "dead matter." But if the tentative findings of parapsychologists are someday given a coherent theoretical underpinning, we may awake to find everything alive in our world, as well. Mind, which in recent experiment seems able to meddle in the minute interstices of the atom and to peek around time's corner, will be seen to evoke a

response in matter, and matter, no longer inert, will be seen to be in some sense responsive. Perhaps even the "physical" processes of faerie and Philadelphia may someday prove the same.

Finally, however, Tolkien believes that it is more than fantasy's being true to itself in its inner-consistency, and true to us in its faithful resonance with the deepest processes of our world, which accounts for fantasy being "story-making in its primary and most potent mode." (Ibid., p. 49.) It is in its successful evocation of good, he asserts, that fantasy makes its deepest contact with our world and all worlds.

Good and evil, of course, figure prominently in The Lord of the Rings, and noting the clarity with which they are drawn, those of Tolkien's critics who would ridicule fantasy as an infantile escape proclaim him "simplistic." All of us, I would guess, have felt the sting of uninformed criticism of our "potty" interest in the fantastic. Even today I feel the flush of embarrassment I felt at such criticism when, more than half a lifetime ago, I sat, a sixteen-year-old, eating dinner with my family and watching television newscast. On came a newsman who, in imposing tones and with what passed for august reportorial authority in those days, told us of the three certain signs of teen suicide. The first who I have now forgotten, but the third, and in the reporter's opinion the most telling, was a "morbid" interest in fantasy and science fiction. Implicit in the reporter's tone and commentary, and in my parents sidelong glances, was the assumption that any interest in such dangerous stuff was morbid.

Whatever my parents thought, they said nothing. Perhaps they knew it to be too late to salvage me, their oldest child, with whom the insidious genre had had its way since his discovery in second grade of Spaceship Under the Apple Tree. Times, certainly, have changed since I was young, but lest you think they have changed overmuch, try telling myth-deaf neighbor (or your employer) that you have seen Return of the Jedi six times!

Those of us who live in the afterglow of high fantasy know that there is a reason for the growth of the fantastic in our times, and such prejudice against the fantastic stings because it is so wrong, so at variance with our own experience of the genre. High fantasy is not an escape from a drab world into the unreal, but an escape to a Real that finds its reflection both in this world and in faerie. Good and evil are inevitably drawn in the Lord of the Rings with great clarity and vigor; it is the nature of the fantastic secondary world to accentuate the processes of the primary world to capture them in its numinous web, and Tolkien believes correctly that the good is indistinguishable from the deepest of those processes. Those who fault Tolkien for his simplistic evocation of good and evil and for his not being "true to life" miss the point of fantasy, and they miss, as well, something that is a deep part, perhaps the best part, of being human.

And to Weil's assertion that fantasy is "immoral," Tolkien would respond that "uncorrupted, (high fantasy) does not seek delusion nor bewitchment and domination; it seeks shared enrichment, partners in making and delight, not slaves." (Ibid., p. 53.) Finally, Tolkien believes, "the eucatastrophic tale," that tale that suddenly ends in good, "is the true form of fairy tale, and its highest function." (Ibid.,

p. 68.) In the eucatastrophy, the good evoked in high fantasy sparks with the numinous and momentarily opens us to the ground of good.

The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending; or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn' (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially 'escapist,' nor 'fugitive.' It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophy, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies universal final defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.

It is the mark of a good fairy-story, of the higher or more complete kind, that however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to child or man that hears it, when the 'turn' comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art, and having a peculiar quality. The peculiar quality of the 'joy' in successful Fantasy can...be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth. (Ibid., p. 68-71.)

Those of us who have experienced the Joy of the eucatastrophy of high fantasy will certainly agree with Shelley that "the great instrument of the moral good is the imagination."<sup>4</sup>

#### NOTES

- 1) MacDonald, George, The Golden Key, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1967. p. 86.
- 2) Tolkien, J.R.R., The Tolkien Reader, Ballantine Books, New York, 1966. p. 37.
- 3) Isaacs, Neil D., and Zimbardo, Rose A., eds., Tolkien and the Critics: Essays on J.R.R. Tolkien's LORD OF THE RINGS, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame & London, 1968. p. 89.
- 4) Le Guin, Ursula K., The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction, Berkley Books, New York, 1982.

